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# Historic Cambridge Common

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HISTORIC  
CAMBRIDGE COMMON

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By  
Charles C. Farrington ✓  
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Bedford, Massachusetts  
1918

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THE WASHINGTON ELM



## FOREWORD

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History is repeating itself in Cambridge in 1918. Its famous Common has once more become a war camp.

The United States Government has taken possession of the Common for the period of the war, or such time as its use is necessary, and here is located a part of the Radio School, now being conducted at Cambridge by the Navy Department.

Known world-wide as the place where the first American army was organized, and trained under General Washington, in 1775, to fight for American liberty, it is most fitting that the same site should be used to play a part in the great war now being waged for the liberty and freedom of the world.

No plot of public ground in the Country is more historic, and probably

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no other, with the exception of Boston Common, has been for so long a time devoted continuously to public uses. It certainly has no other rival in the associations which connect it inseparably with the early and most vital periods in our National history, and its occupation now as a part of the extensive training system of the present war will add still another link in the chain of events that has already given it renown.

## IN EARLY TIMES

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From the earliest days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony great importance was attached to military training and up to the year 1681 it was compulsory for all able-bodied men over sixteen years of age. In making their plans of the "New Towne"<sup>1</sup> the pioneer settlers of Cambridge reserved a large tract of land for "town commons," primarily, however, as a training-field for the militia.

It is to that wisely-made provision, then, that the Cambridge of today is indebted for its beautiful Common with its long train of cherished memories spanning nearly three centuries; a spot in which all Cambridge takes a just pride and one that is revered by the thousands of tourists who every

1. Newtowne was settled in 1631. The name was changed to Cambridge in 1636.

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year come to visit the historic shrines of Boston and vicinity.

The Common as it stands today, containing about ten acres, is but a part of the original tract which extended as far north as Linnaean Street, embracing the land between Massachusetts Avenue and Garden Street<sup>1</sup>; and to the south, taking in the open space now known as Harvard Square.

The northern, and much the larger part, was fenced in for the safe pasturage of cows, it being necessary to protect them at night against the depredations of Indians and the incursion of wild animals. This portion was known as the "Cow Common." At the extreme upper end was the "gallows lot,"—an acre or so of rising ground which was separated from the rest of the enclosure. Here was located the

1. Until the later part of the eighteenth century Garden street was known as Washington street from the associations connected with the now famous Washington Elm.

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gallows and on this spot executions took place publicly for many years.

In 1724 the "Cow Common" was divided into lots and sold to individuals, the part remaining—that below the line of Waterhouse Street—being left as it was originally. The Common thus reduced in size was held as the property of the Proprietors of Common Lands until 1769, when it was granted to the town of Cambridge, with the provision that it lie undivided for use as a training field, and remain so forever. It served as a general meeting place for the town's people on occasions of public celebration or festivity, and not the least important of all, for political gatherings.

"Training days," as they were first called, and in later times "muster days," were features of life in the Colony for more than a century and might be called the first New England holidays, for such they were. Elec-

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tion day was in reality another holiday and many local customs were observed. An "election sermon" was preached and "election cake" had its place on the day's bill-of-fare. Commencement day was also observed generally throughout the Colony, but to Cambridge, people flocked from all parts of the State to participate in the festivities of this, the great gala day in the College year. The Common was the principal scene of activities on all of these recurring events, and great crowds were always in attendance.

Commencement day, coming in mid-summer, was perhaps the crowning festival of the year. The Common was then covered over with booths and tents from which refreshments were served and wherein sideshows and various forms of entertainment were given. The Governor was always present on these occasions and the bright uniforms worn by his military

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escort served to enhance the already picturesque scene.

The Common was the rendezvous of the Middlesex yeomanry in times of public emergency and here civic affairs were discussed and debated. After the English custom the early elections in the Colony were held out-of-doors and there were times on election days when stirring scenes were enacted on the Common. One of the most memorable of these occasions was in 1637 when the youthful governor, Sir Henry Vane, a strong supporter of the religious views expounded by the famous Anne Hutchinson, was being opposed by Ex-Governor John Winthrop. Such excitement prevailed that violence was feared, the contest resulting in Vane's defeat.

The elections were held under an oak tree which stood on the easterly side of the Common.

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In 1740, the celebrated English clergyman, Rev. George Whitefield, visited Cambridge, and being refused the use of the meeting house, preached in the open air on the Common. The evangelist gathered his audiences under a large elm tree in the northwestern part of the field and the crowds which heard him preach were estimated at thousands. The tree was afterward known as the "Whitefield tree."

On September 2, 1774, the Common was the scene of one of the many stirring events which preceded the Revolution. The day previous, a detachment sent out by General Gage had seized 250 half-barrels of powder stored in the magazine at Charlestown (now known as the Old Powder House, in Somerville) and had also removed two field pieces from Cambridge. These acts aroused great indignation and two thousand Middlesex freeholders collected on the Common



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to discuss their grievances. Excitement ran high and the resignations of three councillors — Lieutenant Governor Oliver, and Judges Danforth and Lee, residents of Cambridge—were demanded. The determined attitude of the assemblage was not to be misunderstood and all three deemed it wise to comply with the request.

## IN 1775-1776

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It is in the Cambridge, and therefore the Common, at the time of the Revolution, rather than in the earlier years, in which there is manifested a more general interest, as the events occurring in that period are a part of our National history in which all citizens of the country share alike.

In 1775, Cambridge was a town of about sixteen hundred inhabitants. Harvard Square and vicinity, known as "Cambridge Village," was the residential centre. There were two routes to Boston—one by the way of Wood Street (Boylston) and the "Great Bridge," through Brighton, Brookline and Roxbury, a distance of eight miles; the other, by way of the Watertown Road to Charlestown, connecting with the ferry. The Concord Road; or turnpike, (Massachusetts

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Avenue) ran northward from the village, crossing at the lower part of the Common, the Watertown Road. The latter road crossed what is now Gardon Street near the Washington Elm and continued by way of the present Mason and Brattle Streets.

In the neighborhood of Harvard Square and the Common were many fine estates not a few of which were owned by wealthy loyalists, who, early in 1775, abandoned their luxurious homes and left with their families for more congenial localities. Most of these refugees were later banished by the Legislature and never returned to Cambridge. The commodious mansions thus left vacant were confiscated and made use of for hospitals, the quartering of troops and various other army purposes. Brattle Street, where a number of these estates were situated, was known in pre-revolutionary days as "Tory Row."

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The Common in 1775 was practically the same in extent as it is today. The turnpike formed the eastern boundary on which bordered the College yard, and on the southern side, across Garden Street, was the ancient burying ground, Christ Church and the schoolhouse. What is now Waterhouse Street formed the northern, and the Concord Road, the northeastern boundary. On Waterhouse Street was the residence of William Vassall<sup>1</sup> and beyond this, at the corner of the Concord Road, stood the Red Lion Inn. East of the Concord Road, about midway of the Common, on what is now called Holmes Place, were four houses, one of which, in 1775, was owned and occupied by Jonathan Hast-

1. Vassall left with his family for England in 1775 and did not return. The house was bought after the Revolution by Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, who is noted as having introduced the use of kine pox for vaccination into America.

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ings, Jr., for many years steward of Harvard College.<sup>1</sup>

There were four Halls within the College yard: Massachusetts, Harvard, Hollis and Stoughton (the first of that name) also the president's residence—"Wadsworth House" and Holden Chapel. A little to the west of the president's house, facing the turnpike, was the First Parish meeting-house, and across the turnpike stood the new Court House.

After the breaking out of hostilities at Lexington and Concord on the nineteenth of April, Cambridge at once became the centre of actual and active preparations for war. The Provincial Congress had already met here on two different occasions and transacted important business.

1. This house became later the home of Rev. Abiel Holmes, pastor of the First Church, and here his son, Oliver Wendell Holmes, the poet, was born. It was torn down in 1883 when the new law school, Austin Hall, was built.

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At its first session (October, 1774) a Committee of Safety and Supplies was chosen. This committee established its headquarters in the house of Jonathan Hastings, opposite the Common, and to it was entrusted the task of raising an army and the collecting of military stores. General Artemas Ward, who was then in command, took up quarters, also, in the Hastings house.

Immediately following the events of April 19 began the siege of Boston. A call for volunteers, issued by the Committee of Safety, was sent out all through New England, and men were now hastening toward Cambridge from every direction. They left their fields, their herds and flocks, and taking with them only such weapons as they possessed, they answered the first call to arms in the Revolution, eager to enlist in the cause of liberty. Within a week upwards of 8,000 men

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had responded. On Cambridge Common were pitched the camps of this first American Army.

Dorothy Dudley, an eye-witness to what transpired in Cambridge during this history-making period, has given some vivid descriptions as recorded in her diary.<sup>1</sup> April 21 she writes: "Our little town is the seat of war. An army is gathering in our midst. Volunteers come from all quarters, many with nothing but the clothes on their backs, no money, no provisions. The Common is the rendezvous for the military, and a busy scene it is, with its groups of excited minutemen and thousand signs of warlike preparations." A few days later she writes: "There is great want of powder, muskets and other necessities. All possible efforts are being made to supply the needs of clothing, tents and firearms."

1. "The Cambridge of 1776."

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It was impossible to accommodate in camps the great number of men who had now arrived in Cambridge and quarters had to be provided for them wherever they could be obtained. It was necessary to take possession of the College buildings and convert them into barracks. Christ Church was used for a similar purpose, while many of the troops were quartered in the unoccupied houses of the loyalists who had left the town.

On the fifteenth of June the Continental Congress at Philadelphia chose George Washington of Virginia as Commander-in-Chief of the united armies of the Colonies and he was soon on his way to Cambridge. The president's house, in the College yard, had been designated by the Provincial Congress as the quarters of the new Commander and was being prepared for his reception.



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On the night of the sixteenth of June there went forth from Cambridge Common a detachment of 1,000 troops, commanded by Colonel Prescott, to fortify Bunker Hill, where it was expected that an attack by the British might be made. Before leaving, they were drawn up opposite the Hastings house, from the steps of which prayer was offered by Rev. Dr. Langdon, president of Harvard College. The troops were provided with intrenching tools and at about nine o'clock began their march, silently, toward their destination. The following day occurred the memorable battle of Bunker Hill.

On the second of July General Washington arrived in Cambridge. He was met at Watertown by a cavalcade of citizens and a troop of light horse, and escorted into town, where he received an enthusiastic welcome. The quarters assigned to

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him not being in readiness that day he repaired to the Hastings house.

The day following his arrival Washington assumed command of the army, on the Common, in the presence not only of the troops, but thousands of spectators, who had gathered to witness the inspiring sight. General Ward, at the head of the troops, read the commission of the new commander. Washington, who was mounted, rode forward a few paces, drew his sword, accepted the office to which Congress had appointed him and thereby took command of the army.

Dorothy Dudley writes under date of July 3: "General Washington is here. Today he took command under one of the grand old elms on the Common. It was a magnificent sight. The majestic figure of the General, mounted upon his horse, beneath the wide spreading branches of this pa-

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triarch tree; the multitude thronging the plain around, while the air rung with shouts as he drew his sword and declared himself Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army."

The quarters which had been provided for General Washington did not prove altogether satisfactory and after only a few days' occupancy he took possession of the house of John Vassall<sup>1</sup>, where he resided during his stay in Cambridge.

From now on the Common was the scene of the greatest activity. Every effort was put forth to provide the necessary equipments, and the task of organization of the army was begun. There was daily drilling and columns of men were constantly marching about to the music of fife and drum. Washington, immediately upon assuming charge, inspected the

1. Afterward the home of the poet, Henry W. Longfellow. The house is still standing on Brattle Street.

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camp, to acquaint himself with its needs, and within a week made his first report to Congress. Rev. William Emerson, a chaplain, gives a graphic description of the camp at this time.

He says: "There is great overturning as to order and regularity. The Generals, Washington and Lee, are upon the lines every day. New orders from His Excellency are read to the regiments every morning after prayers. The strictest government is taking place, and every distinction is made between officers and men. Thousands are at work every day from four until eleven o'clock in the morning. It is surprising how much has been done. The lines are extended almost from Cambridge to Mystic river. It is very diverting to walk among the camps. They are as different in their form as the owners are in their dress; and every tent is

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a portraiture of the temper and taste of the persons who encamp in it. Some are of boards, and some of sail-cloth. Some partly of one and partly of the other. Again, others are made of stone and turf, brick or brush. Some are thrown up in a hurry, others are curiously wrought with doors and windows, done with wreaths and withes in the manner of a basket. Some are your proper tents and marquees, looking like the regular camp of the enemy." Thatcher's *Military Journal* describes General Washington's personal appearance as follows: "It is not difficult to distinguish him from all others. His appearance is truly noble and majestic. being tall and well proportioned. His dress is a blue coat with buff-colored facings; a rich epaulette on each shoulder; buff under-dress, and an elegant small-sword; a black cockade in his hat."

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During the autumn the camp was prepared as far as possible against the approaching winter. A barracks building was erected at the north-western part of the Common, but it was not ready for use until after snow had fallen, early in December. The winter was a severe one and great hardships were endured by the soldiers in their various quarters. The supply of firewood was so reduced that groves of valuable timber in the vicinity had to be cut down for fuel. Ammunition was so scarce that everything that could be found which could be molded into bullets was used. The organ pipes from Christ Church, the leaden roof of Harvard Hall, door knobs and other metal fittings of the College buildings, found their way into the melting pot.

The early spring of 1776 brought relief in more ways than one. The hardships of winter were ended and

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ammunition had now become more plentiful. Signs pointed to an early evacuation of Boston by the British, and General Washington was preparing to hasten their departure.

The winter had been equally as hard for the troops penned up in Boston, as it was for those in the American camps which surrounded it, and all their supplies were at a very low ebb. The fortifying of Dorchester Heights by Washington proved to General Howe the impossibility of longer holding the town, and on the seventeenth of March he sailed with his troops for Halifax.

There was great rejoicing when the siege of Boston was raised, and especially, when on the day following the evacuation, Washington with his victorious army entered the town. Soon afterward the troops left Cambridge for New York, and the Common ceased to be a military camp.

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In October, 1777, the captured soldiers of Burgoyne's army were brought to Cambridge and quartered there in various houses for more than a year. The Common did not play a part in this chapter of the town's military history except, perhaps, that it was used by the soldier-prisoners as a place for exercise and recreation.

In 1789, when he was President of the United States, Washington made his last tour through New England and visited Cambridge Common. There he was accorded a welcome such as the high office he then filled demanded.



## BECOMES A PARK

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In 1830, after considerable opposition, the Common was fenced in and laid out as a public park, with walks and shade trees. By the widening of Garden Street many years ago the "Washington Elm" and the "Whitefield tree," once included in the Common, were separated from it. The former now stands in a little enclosure in the middle of Garden Street, while the "Whitefield tree," which was considered an obstruction to travel, has been removed.

The soldiers' monument which stands on the Common was erected by the City of Cambridge and dedicated in the summer of 1870. It was designed by the famous Cobb brothers, Cyrus and Darius, then both residents of Cambridge and veterans of the Civil War, and is considered

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one of the finest structures of its kind in the country. The three cannon which flank the base of the monument are relics of the Revolution, having been captured by Ethan Allen at Crown Point, in 1775, and brought to Cambridge with other spoils, on ox sleds, by General Knox. They were used during the siege of Boston.

At the lower end of the Common is a beautiful memorial gateway, of pink granite, erected by the General Society of the Daughters of the Revolution. Bronze tablets on either side of the entrance are inscribed as follows: On the left, "Near this spot on July 3, 1775, George Washington took command of the American Army"; on the right, "In memory of this event, this gateway was erected A. D. October, 1906."

The statue of John Bridge, which stands at the northern end of the

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Common, portrays one of the early settlers of the town who held many positions of honor and trust.

Surrounding the Common there remain, beside several of the buildings of Harvard, but few reminders of the Revolution. Christ Church on Garden Street, the Waterhouse house on Waterhouse Street, and the "Washington Elm, are now the only other nearby objects that witnessed the scenes on the Common when Washington's army was encamped there, nearly a century and a half ago.

"Training days" in Cambridge are a thing of the past. Commencement, is, of course, observed each year at Harvard with the customary literary exercises, the celebration of the day otherwise, however, is no longer a public affair as in the early years, being confined altogether to graduates and those immediately connected with the University.

## AS IT IS TODAY

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Today, the Common, once more a war camp, presents a busy scene. Its surface is largely covered with the buildings of the Radio School, and the whole park is enclosed by high board fence. The buildings include barracks, which are constructed around the sides of the Common, a recitation hall, administration building and power plant. The main entrance to the enclosure is on Massachusetts Avenue opposite Holmes Place. The buildings are all of the same style of construction, neat and attractive in appearance, and are equipped in every particular for the welfare of the students.

The camp has been so planned that no harm will come to the beautiful shade trees or any of the structural features which adorn the Common.



SOUTH SIDE OF COMMON, SHOWING BARRACKS AND SOLDIERS' MONUMENT



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Of the 5,000 men who are at this Radio School the camp on the Common will accommodate in its barracks only 1,800. The larger portion are still occupying for barracks and instruction purposes several of the Harvard University buildings as they have done for nearly a year. In all departments the regulations of the Navy are strictly observed.

While the Common long ago ceased to be used as a training field, the soldiers' monument and the grim old cannon give to the place a permanent touch of the military atmosphere which belongs to it, and, forming as they do, in the centre of the camp, a group of silent reminders of two former wars, they will serve the purpose of an impressive object lesson in patriotism to the hundreds of young men who are now training there for service in still another—the greatest of all wars in history.

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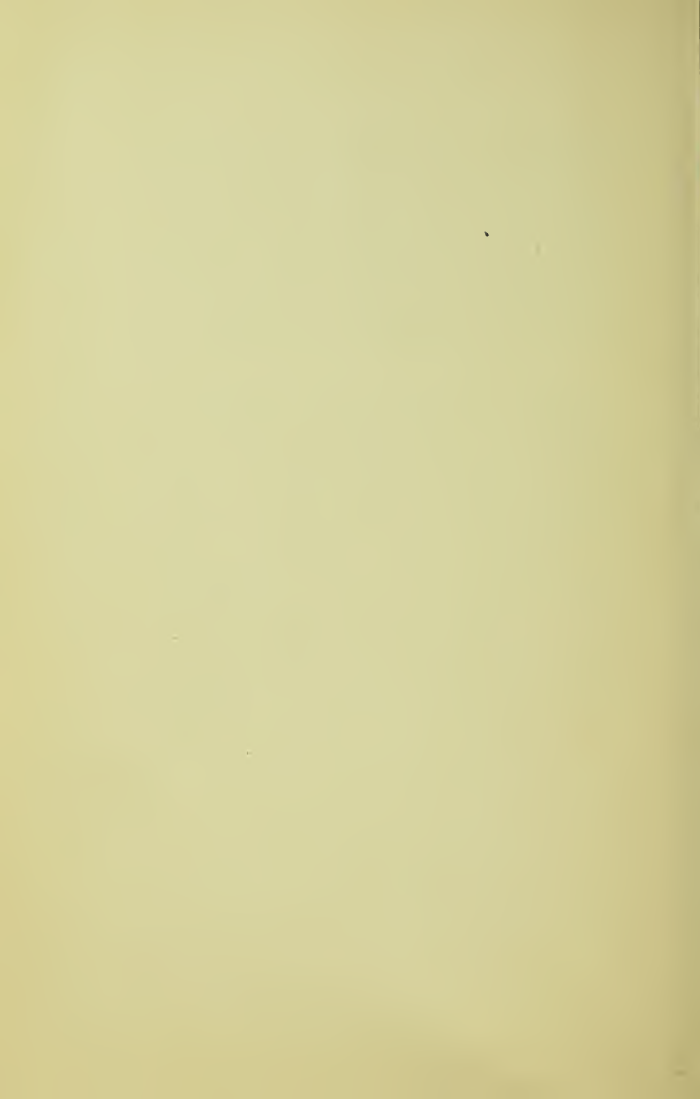
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But the Common, notwithstanding the fact that the requirements for which it was originally designed long ago ceased to exist, still belongs to the people of Cambridge, and always will.

When the war is over and the site no longer needed by the Government, the buildings removed, and the grounds restored to their former beauty, the Common will be all the more appreciated by the people of Cambridge for its having been used in such a glorious cause; and for the sacrifice they have made in relinquishing it they will have been well repaid.







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